

Frequently Asked Questions about Sawfish: *the species and the Endangered Species Act (ESA)*



photo credit R. Dean Grubbs

Where do sawfish live?

*Currently you can find sawfish off both Florida coasts.

•Before becoming endangered, Smalltooth sawfish were once a common species found throughout the Gulf of Mexico and in the Atlantic Ocean from Florida to North Carolina.

Why are they endangered?

*Due to fishing and habitat loss, their population has declined by more than 95%, and today can only be commonly found in areas of south Florida.

•Smalltooth sawfish were listed as endangered under the Endangered Species Act on April 1, 2003, which makes it illegal to harm, harass or handle them in any way. It is therefore illegal to actively attempt to hook or net one, except with a permit, or in a permitted fishery. Accidental captures do occur while fishing for other species. For more information on the ESA please visit <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/laws/esa/>

What should I do if I accidentally catch a sawfish?

•If a sawfish is hooked or netted it should be released immediately.

*Cut the fishing line as soon as you know you have captured a sawfish.

*Cut the line as close to the animal as safely possible while keeping the fish in the water.

Are there any other concerns related to catching and handling sawfish?

*Yes, human safety. Sawfish are large powerful animals that can cause serious injury. The teeth on the rostrum are pointed and have been known to cause injury. Do not attempt to bring a sawfish close to you or your vessel.

*For more on sawfish handling and release guidelines, please

visit <http://sero.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/esa/Smalltooth%20sawfish/Sawfish%20Safe%20Release%20Practices-2007.pdf>

What is the punishment(s) for violating the Endangered Species Act?

•Penalties for violating the Endangered Species Act and illegally interacting with a member of a protected species can be severe.

•Violators can face imprisonment or steep fines for their actions. The size of the penalty increases with the number of violations- either the size of the fine or the length of time spent in prison, with a maximum fine of \$50,000 and a maximum imprisonment of one year, or a combination of the two. Violators may also incur civil penalties of up to \$25,000 per violation, with the highest penalties reserved for unlawful trafficking in a protected species, or what the act refers to as consciously "taking" (which covers capturing and killing.) Simply harassing an endangered animal can carry a fine of \$10,500.